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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 001197

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SUBJECT: ISLAMISTS PLANNING TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 1193

Classified By: CDA Steven Koutsis, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

(C) Summary

-- Jemil Mansour, a key figure in Mauritania's Islamist movement, told Charge that Islamists are planning on actively participating in the coming elections.

-- Mansour indicated that if the government prevented their participation, the Islamists would "respond in a proportionate way."

-- Mansour's group has joined other parties in denouncing the government's recent meddling (reftel). He threatened that continued government interference in the political process would lead to a boycott of the elections, "but we're not there yet."

-- As Islamist parties have been denied official government recognition, they plan to run their candidates on independent lists.

(C) Comments

-- Mansour has consistently portrayed himself, and Mauritania's Islamists, as moderate and supportive of open relations and dialogue with the West.

-- How the Ministry of Interior handles accreditation of candidate lists will be the next test on how open the government will be in the process. If past practice is indicative, the government will not stay entirely neutral.

End Summary and Comments.

¶1. (C) Jemil Ould Mansour, a key figure in Mauritania's Islamist movement, met with Charge September 27 to discuss Islamists' plans for the coming elections. Mansour began the meeting by explaining that Mauritanian Islamists, represented by his unrecognized political party The Centrist Reformist Party, are moderate and want "direct and open relations with all our partners including the United States," and he stressed the importance of "an ongoing and open dialogue."

ISLAMIST ELECTORAL STRATEGY

¶2. (C) Mansour said that, as his party is unrecognized by the government, they intend to run their Islamists candidates on independent lists. He was confident that the group could establish lists at least in all the major cities, despite the government interference. "The Mauritanian people will know that our lists are Islamists, and won't confuse our candidates with the governments independent lists," referring to the recent efforts by the government to encourage candidates to run as independents (reftel).

¶3. (C) When asked what Islamists would do if the government banned them from running as independents, Mansour said "I have heard the rumors that this might happen, but it would be a very stupid move by the government and I don't believe they will do it," adding that "if they did so, we would find a proportionate response." "Though unrecognized, we are an important political force," he said, adding that "this is why Colonel Vall met with us before the referendum and asked for our support." Mansour, however, was concerned that the government would find ways to remove the more influential individuals from lists, rather than rejecting lists entirely, as a way to limit the Islamists' ability to attract votes.

ISLAMIST VIEWS ON THE TRANSITION

¶4. (C) "We believe the best thing for the Mauritanian people

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is to have a transparent transition to elections and democracy," Mansour said. "This is why we have supported the democratic transition since August 3, despite continued harassment and the withholding of recognition by the government." "The problem," Mansour said, "is the word Islamist." "There are extreme Islamists and moderate Islamists, and we are moderate," he said, adding that "this is why we prefer to call ourselves Centrist Reformists."

¶5. (C) Mansour discussed the current political party unrest over the government's actions to encourage independent candidates (reftel) saying "the government has broken its promise of neutrality and this is a very bad sign." He noted his group has joined together with Mauritania's other political parties to oppose this interference, adding "we are not currently planning on boycotting the elections, but we have not ruled out such an action."

¶6. (C) Mansour said the National Independent Electoral Commission had an important role to play, but that currently it was "a little weak and lacked sufficient independence to be effective." He also stressed the importance of national and international election observers.

GOVERNMENT MAINTAINS ITS POSITION ON ISLAMISTS

¶7. (U) In Vall's recent visit to France (reftel) he once again reaffirmed the government's position on Islamist parties, saying "there is no question and there will never be any question of authorizing any party in the name of religion and in the name of Islam." He added "we shall not allow anybody to takeover what belongs to everybody. In Mauritania, Islam belongs to everybody."

¶8. (C) Mansour has a long history of activism in Mauritania, and was frequently jailed for periods of weeks to months between the late 1990s and 2005 (during the Taya administration). Claiming asylum in Belgium from June 2003 until February 2004, Mansour started the "Mauritanian Forum

for Reform and Democracy." Charge met him at his unrecognized political party office on the second story of an Islamic youth center.
Koutsis